

Introduction

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Many, many people whose lives have been touched by the revered cultural ambassador, spiritual guide, and drummer Michael Babatunde Olatunji (1927–2003) have long been waiting for this book, his life story in his own words. Olatunji’s monumental legacy spans half a century and has touched vast communities of Americans, whether or not they are aware of it. Well before Alex Haley’s *Roots*, James Brown’s “Say It Loud,” and Stokely Carmichael’s “Black Power,” Olatunji sparked a deep sense of pride among African Americans by strongly promoting positive images of African culture in the United States. The currents he helped along and also set into motion have flowed in various and unexpected directions—and continue to do so—impacting Americans of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. And he did it through drumming.

In tune with the times, and a formative influence in shaping them, Olatunji’s debut album *Drums of Passion* was recorded several months before, and released a few months after, the February 1960 black student sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, which would transform the growing civil rights struggle into a national movement overnight. Both events—one cultural (the release of *Drums of Passion*) and one social (the rapid spread

of sit-ins)—permanently changed the consciousness of many Americans and helped jump-start one of the most dynamic and volatile decades in American history. In an era marked by towering figures such as Nkrumah, Kennedy, King, and Malcolm X—not to mention musicians such as Coltrane, Roach, Blakey, Belafonte, and Dylan—Olatunji, who knew all of them, was there and in demand. Through his recording, performing, and teaching (at first with black youth throughout the urban Northeast; much later with more affluent white adults in idyllic retreats), Olatunji built bridges reconnecting, and connecting for the first time, Americans with a lost past, be it a fantastic imagined mythical ancient utopia or a more recent and tangible one violently interrupted over the past several centuries. That past was Africa, a symbol that represented an endless source of pride, roots, spiritual rejuvenation, and powerful healing forces in the face of an increasingly industrialized world.

Olatunji's rich legacy, from *Drums of Passion* to the hand drumming and drum circle movement that has spread around the world, embodies important issues concerning race and representation that may escape many. These issues revolve around the place of Africa in the United States, more specifically, the struggles of African immigrant artists to represent and maintain African culture in this country, the stereotypes that can become mutually reinforced in the process, the struggles of African Americans to incorporate recent African traditions into their lives, and the capacity of Americans to understand, interpret, appropriate, reinterpret, and romanticize images of Africa.

In this introduction, I will try to place Olatunji's career in historical context so that readers may better appreciate his enormous contributions and better understand some of the issues surrounding his legacy. I will also fill in some gaps in the narrative, in particular, those relating to his predecessors, colleagues, and students who have carried on the flame.

Overview of Olatunji's Career in the United States

Olatunji arrived in the United States from Nigeria as a student to attend historically black Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1950, before the era of the modern Civil Rights Movement. He immediately saw the need to address widespread ignorance of Africa, and he took it as his mission to expose and enlighten Americans to the wealth of African culture. His cultural knowledge—as much as could be expected from a 23-year-old

groomed, not as a drummer (a skill that is usually kept within certain family lineages in the region where he grew up), but rather to follow in his father's footsteps as a village leader—primarily came from his own Yoruba and Christian upbringing. His leadership skills very quickly became apparent.

After graduating from Morehouse in 1954, he moved to New York to begin graduate school in public administration at New York University. Eventually he had to abandon that path due to lack of funding. By then, already pursuing his calling as a cultural ambassador, he had formed a drum and dance troupe, recruiting talented young African Americans thirsty for the then-rare taste of African culture. In the autumn of 1958 he landed a job where he was featured nightly with the Radio City Music Hall orchestra in a piece titled "African Fantasy." The following year he gained a coveted prize: a recording contract with Columbia Records. The result was five albums released between 1960 and 1966 (see discography). His career took off, and he toured extensively in the early 1960s, playing at clubs like the Village Gate in New York, where in 1961 he shared the bill with John Coltrane and Art Blakey, and performing at the New York World's Fair in 1964.

He realized one dream in 1967, when he opened the Olatunji Center of African Culture at 43 East 125th Street in Harlem. By then, calls for civil rights had shifted to those for black power. As the 1960s and 1970s wore on, he taught extensively in community schools, and he languished as interest in Africa began to fade. His particular conception of African culture was becoming less and less relevant in black communities, and his center eventually had to close in the early 1980s due to lack of financial support.

An encounter with drummer Mickey Hart led to Olatunji and his group opening for the Grateful Dead at a 1985 New Year's Eve concert in Oakland, California (see videography). Olatunji's fortunes changed, and his influence began to spread again as he reached new audiences. He became a venerated father figure and spiritual guru to a predominantly white hand-drumming and drum circle movement that has surged around the world. A 1992 Marin County, California drum circle—one of the largest ever, with about two thousand drummers—organized by Mickey Hart (see Dunham 1992), attested to Olatunji's impact on this recent generation of hand drummers. He lived out his last years (into his mid-seventies) struggling with diabetes and strapped financially, teaching at holistic retreats and institutes such as Omega (in upstate New York) and Esalen (in Big Sur, California), and lending his presence to a variety of events for world peace.

He remains a symbol of African pride in certain circles, as evidenced by his powerful contribution to a recent CD commemorating the life and poetry of the late Tupac Shakur (2000).

Drums of Passion

The impact of Olatunji's first LP, *Drums of Passion*, can hardly be overstated, yet much about it needs to be qualified. Misconceptions abound as to what exactly that album represents, because it is not easily categorized; it slips between the cracks and blurs simplistic us/them and here/there dichotomies. It introduced hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of Americans to African drumming, yet all the other performers on the album were African Americans or Afro Caribbeans from the New York area. Its songs and rhythms point to Nigeria, yet the performances on it are a hybrid of styles played on hybrid combinations of drums, many from Ghana. It established Olatunji as Africa's most famous drummer, yet he was relatively unknown in his home country as a drummer. And the three other drummers on it, Chief Bey, Taiwo DuVall, and Montego Joe—the ones responsible for much of its percussive power—not to mention the other vocalists, all remain relatively unknown outside New York's African American community.

What was so special about *Drums of Passion*? In short, it was an extraordinary document made by extraordinary people at an extraordinary time. America in the 1950s was slowly being prepared for it, and by the end of the decade the times were ripe, bursting with a new kind of energy waiting to be channeled and unleashed.

As for the musical climate, a Cuban chachachá craze had swept the United States in the mid-1950s, right on the heels of the mambo boom. These styles brought with them Afro-Cuban percussion, which was not too far removed (at least to the American public at the time) from Olatunji's Nigerian sounds and rhythms, some of which had traveled centuries ago to Cuba, where they were fostered in local Yoruba-based drumming. Calypso was also given a big shot in the arm with the launch of Harry Belafonte's successful recording career in the mid-1950s. The Folkways label was issuing close to two dozen albums of music recorded in Africa, including Yoruba drumming from Nigeria. More and more African-based percussion albums (primarily Afro-Cuban) were being recorded in the United States. And in 1955, Ghanaian percussionist Guy Warren began recording a series of albums for major American labels. American appetites for things

Caribbean and African were primed. Regarding politics, the independence of Ghana in March 1957 spawned a tidal wave that resulted in the rapid decolonization of Africa; eighteen more African nations (including Nigeria) had achieved independence by the end of 1960. In social terms, African Americans were making their presence and sense of urgency for civil rights felt in unprecedented and increasingly public ways. There was a growing sense that somehow a lost history had to be restored in order to instill pride and self-worth. Olatunji provided a window onto that history, one that could be widely appreciated by many Americans.

Some records released immediately before *Drums of Passion* offer a taste of the rising musical tide. In the two-and-a-half years between February 1957 (just before Ghana's independence) and August 1959 (when Olatunji began recording *Drums of Passion*), the Blue Note, Columbia, Fantasy, and RCA record labels recorded percussion LPs by Art Blakey (1957a, 1957b, 1959), Tito Puente (1957), Louis "Sabu" Martínez (1957, 1958a, 1958b), Guy Warren (1958), and Mongo Santamaria (1959a, 1959b). Blakey, who around 1947 traveled to Nigeria and Ghana to study and live, was an important force in raising awareness of African-based percussion in the New York jazz scene (see Monson 2000). By the late 1950s, that awareness was blossoming. Ghanaian saxophonist and percussionist Saka Acquaye, who was studying art and leading an ensemble in Philadelphia, released an African highlife and percussion LP on the Elektra label in 1959, sometime before November, when it received a notice in the *New York Times* (Shelton 1959).

In the 1950s, other musicians besides percussionists were also responding to impulses from Africa—if not yet in their music, then in their song titles. Saxophonist Sonny Rollins recorded his composition "Airegin" (Nigeria spelled backwards) with Miles Davis (1954), as did saxophonist John Coltrane with Davis (1956). Pianist Randy Weston recorded his "Zulu" (1955) and "Bantu Suite" (1958). Both trumpeter Thad Jones and Coltrane made recordings of "Dakar" (composed by Teddy Charles) in early 1957. Coltrane also recorded Wilbur Harden and Oscar Cadena's "Dial Africa," and Curtis Fuller's "Gold Coast" and "Tanganyika Strut" in 1958. Keyboardist and bandleader Sun Ra recorded his "Africa" about 1958 or 1959. An African consciousness was on the horizon, starting first with nods to the existence of the continent.

Another reason for the success of *Drums of Passion* was that Olatunji had a cultural mission and knew how to communicate with Americans, both

musically and verbally. He crafted a recording that could speak to the growing American thirst for Africa. The liner notes, written by his cousin Akinsola Akiwowo—a sociology professor who came with him as a student to the United States and who would teach at universities here and in Nigeria—invited readers into a new world, one in which Africans were articulate and drums were respected:

The drum, like many exotic articles, is charged with evocative power. The drum is not only a musical instrument, it is also a sacred object and even the tangible form of divinity. It is endowed with a mysterious power, a sort of life-force, which however, has been incomprehensible to many missionaries and early travelers, who ordered its suppression and influence by forbidding its use. (liner notes to *Drums of Passion*)

Nowadays, with more information available about the wide variety of drums used in Africa (for example, Thieme [1969] describes dozens of drums used just by Yoruba), some might question the generalizing tendency reflected in the above extract. African drums each have their own unique names; they are used as markers of unique cultural identities; they have specific cultural and religious contexts; and various levels of status are attached to them. But in its time, this was perhaps the most effective course for introducing Americans to African drumming. In doing so, it also prepared the ground for Olatunji's universalist message, which became so important in his later years. So did Akiwowo's comments on African cultural traditions, arguing for their universal significance—a necessary step in the face of centuries of European and Euro-American racism. And along the way, he made a case for the importance of drumming, although its links with the term "primitive" (no doubt reflecting contemporaneous thought) would play out differently in black and white communities, as we will see below.

Babatunde has lit the flood-light upon the universally human significance of primitive mores and customs, of which drumming, singing, and dancing are significant parts. (liner notes to *Drums of Passion*)

Olatunji's vision for *Drums of Passion* included arranging the music for the relatively new LP format. With four pieces per side, each having a clear

introduction and other internal sections, this was music crafted specifically for presentation on an album. It was African-based music composed and arranged for an American audience, and it worked. The music is, simply put, compelling. The combination of rhythms from Africa and the Caribbean (via his drummers), the original compositions, and the re-creations of songs Olatunji heard in his youth presented Africa as a living creative force. This was not an ethnographic document of Nigerian drumming traditions, but rather Olatunji as composer and arranger within a broad-based African-oriented drum ensemble with excellent players supporting him.

It also helped that the album was released by Columbia, one of the largest record labels in the world at the time, home to Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, and, soon, a young Bob Dylan (you will read about Dylan's encounter with Olatunji at Columbia's offices). Columbia had the money and visibility to promote the album well, and their efforts paid off, at least at first. Olatunji's later Columbia albums met with much less commercial success, and he was eventually left without a record contract.

In late 1959, after *Drums of Passion* was recorded but before it was released, South African vocalist Miriam Makeba made her American debut, first on television and then with an extended stay at the New York club Village Vanguard. She recorded her first American album in May 1960 with RCA. Three years later, with her third album, she became the first African to break into a Billboard Top Pop Album chart. Not until 1967 would an African break into the Top 40 on Billboard's Pop Singles chart—again it would be Makeba, with "Pata Pata." Very few Africans have done that since, notably, South African Hugh Masekela ("Grazing in the Grass," 1968) and Cameroonian Manu Dibango ("Soul Makossa," 1973). The R&B charts have been only slightly more hospitable to African musicians.

Olatunji's early recording years in New York were spent largely with musicians expert in jazz, and the impact of *Drums of Passion* on them was immediate. The month after it was released, he began a short but intense period of recording as a guest percussionist, with the likes of Herbie Mann, Max Roach, Randy Weston, Kai Winding, and finally Cannonball Adderley (in February 1961). Then there was a drought. He would record more albums for Columbia before being dropped from the label about 1966, but he would rarely record as a guest for the next fifteen years.

African consciousness among musicians continued to rise. John Coltrane composed and recorded “Liberia” (October 1960), “Dahomey Dance” (May 1961), “Africa” for his debut album *Africa/Brass* on the new Impulse label (May and June 1961), and then in June 1962 a homage to his friend and inspiration, “Tunji.” Pianist Randy Weston recorded “Uhuru Afrika/Freedom Afrika” (November 1960), vocalist Abbey Lincoln “African Lady” (February 1961), and saxophonist Cannonball Adderley “African Waltz” (February 1961). (See Weinstein [1993] for a study of references to Africa in jazz.)

But the most compelling document of this initial surge was Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr.’s *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* (recorded August and September 1960). With a cover photo of three African American men sitting at a restaurant counter, and pieces called “Driva’ Man,” “Freedom Day,” “Prayer/Protest/Peace,” “All Africa,” and “Tears for Johannesburg,” this was perhaps the strongest musical statement on civil rights of its time. Olatunji, along with Taiwo DuVall, played percussion on “All Africa” and “Tears for Johannesburg.” Years later, Olatunji would be a guest on Brown’s public television show *From Jumpstreet* in the episode “The Source of Soul” (see videography).

Olatunji’s presence on *Freedom Now Suite* was indicative of his standing at the time. He did not just represent Africa, he *was* Africa:

ALL AFRICA connotes both the growing interest of American Negroes in the present and future of Africa and also their new pride in Africa’s past and their own pre-American heritage. In this collaboration between American jazz drummer, Roach, Afro-Cuban players Mantillo and DuVall, and Nigerian Michael Olatunji, it was Olatunji who set the polyrhythmic directions. It is his voice answering Abbey Lincoln in the introduction. She chants the names of African tribes. In answer, Olatunji relates a saying of each tribe concerning freedom—generally in his own Yoruba dialect. (Nat Hentoff in liner notes to Roach 1961)

Drums of Passion reached a new generation in August 1969 when Santana, just after their triumphant Woodstock appearance, released their self-titled debut album, which included a cover version of Olatunji’s “Jin-Go-Lo-Ba.” The impact on the millions who bought that album is incalculable. Olatunji continues to reach new generations with *Drums of*

Passion; the original recording was recently released in an expanded CD edition on Columbia.

African Drumming and Dance in the United States

Compared to some Caribbean and South American countries such as Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil, which still have rich and continuous drumming traditions dating back several centuries, African-based drumming in the United States did not survive slavery to any appreciable extent (see Epstein 1977 and Southern 1997). But in the early and mid-twentieth century, two distinct yet interrelated streams met, laying the foundation for a renaissance in African drumming and dance: the immigration of drummers from the Caribbean (especially Cuba) and Africa; and the formation of professional African-based dance troupes beginning about the 1930s.

(There are a number of excellent surveys and detailed studies of the development of African dance on the twentieth-century American stage. See, for example, Emery 1988, Heard 1999, Perpener 2001, Heard and Mussa 2002, and the 2001 video series *Free to Dance*, which includes clips of Dafora, Primus, and Dunham, who are discussed later. There is relatively little, however, that provides comparable coverage for African drumming in the United States.)

In the 1930s, Asadata Dafora Horton (1890–1965), an immigrant from Sierra Leone, laid the foundations for professional African drum and dance troupes in the United States with the public performances of his ballets, including *Kykunkor* (Martin 1934, Long 1989: 48–9, Heard 1999). Dafora's troupe was among the first, if not *the* first, in the United States to feature staged African drumming and dancing, and he performed extensively across the country up through the 1950s. Dafora also prepared the ground for Olatunji's cultural efforts. In 1943 he helped found the African Academy of Arts and Research, whose mission was "to promote cultural bonds between Africa and the United States" (Anonymous 1943). Dafora directed the academy's inaugural event, an African Dance Festival at Carnegie Hall, which was attended by special guests Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune. It featured a corps of seven drummers and a young Pearl Primus, who "literally stopped the show" with her dancing (Martin 1943).

Katherine Dunham rose to prominence as a dancer around the same time as Dafora. Beginning in 1936, she traveled throughout the West Indies for a year and a half on a fellowship, preparing for the trip by studying with anthropologist Melville Herskovits. On her return, she began choreographing Afro-Caribbean dances for the stage. Soon after, she formed a dance company and then she opened a dance school in New York. Dunham has become one of the most influential figures in the field, straddling the boundaries between performer, choreographer, teacher, and ethnographer. Pearl Primus, born in Trinidad and raised in New York, made a name for herself as a dancer in the early 1940s. For a year beginning in late 1948, she studied dance traditions in Africa (on the same fellowship that Dunham had), traveling extensively in West and Central Africa. Like Dunham, she was highly influential in the development of African dance in the United States. She is noted for having popularized *Fanga*, which is based on a dance of welcome from Liberia or Sierra Leone. (Possibly, it may have been staged first by Dafora, with whom Primus danced early in her career; see Heard 1999: 181–92).

By the time Olatunji arrived in New York in 1954, Dafora, Dunham, and Primus had already developed an appreciation for staged African and Afro-Caribbean dance with African-based drumming accompaniment. Some of Olatunji's drummers and dancers had worked with Dafora and Primus, and carried with them material and expertise, on which Olatunji then built. For example, the Derby sisters, Merle ("Afuavi") and Joan ("Akwasiba"), contributed *Fanga*, which they had learned from Primus (Derby 1996).

The first American tour of Les Ballets Africains in February 1959 must have inspired Olatunji. So, too, that troupe's "superb" (Martin 1959) jembe (djembe) drummer, Ladjali Camara (1923–2004), who would move to the United States in the early 1960s, play with Dunham, and father a jembe movement in New York. Camara would play an important part in Olatunji's fifth and last Columbia LP, *More Drums of Passion*. Les Ballets Africains, formed about 1949 in Paris, became the national ballet of Guinea (in West Africa) at the time of independence (late 1958). Probably, it was the first of the many national ballets and dance ensembles that would be formed throughout Africa in the postcolonial era; certainly, it was a model for other countries. By the time of their tour, Olatunji was enough of a celebrity that a photograph of him mingling at intermission was published in *Bingo*, an African cultural magazine (Anonymous 1959). The previous year, he had gained his first of

many notices in the *New York Times* for what would be his calling in life—bringing his cultural message to Americans, in this case Harlem junior high school students (Anonymous 1958a).

The African-based dance troupes and their leader–choreographers were relatively well known; their drummer accompanists were not. Olatunji would change that. Probably the most immediate antecedent to Olatunji was Moses Mianns (also spelled Miannes), a drummer from Nigeria who immigrated to New York in the 1930s. Mianns did not leave much of a public trace outside New York’s African drum and dance community, although he performed at the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair and also with the Dafora and Primus troupes. His student, the Olatunji accompanist Taiwo DuVall (who has written a short, unpublished biography), credits Mianns with disseminating the ashiko drum, which along with the jembe has become one of the most popular African drums in the United States. Mianns evidently did not bring an ashiko from Nigeria; rather, he had one constructed to his specifications after he arrived in New York. (He can be seen playing ashiko for Primus in Thorpe [1990: 123], and he appears on at least one of the tracks on *The Long Road to Freedom* anthology [Belafonte and others 2001: CD 1]).

Olatunji’s three Drums of Passion drummers merit special mention, not only because of their collaborative efforts in shaping his sound, but also because they are key figures in the modern history of African American hand drumming. Thomas “Taiwo” DuVall met Olatunji shortly after the latter’s arrival in New York, and they began playing together informally. DuVall, whose grandparents were from Jamaica, had learned from Moses Mianns as well as Alphonse Cimber, a Haitian drummer who performed with Primus in the 1940s (see Long [1989: 92] for a photo of Cimber). An accomplished visual artist as well, DuVall played with Dafora and Primus and taught at Olatunji’s Center before moving to Washington, D.C. in the early 1970s. (DuVall can be heard playing solo ashiko on Sule Greg Wilson’s 1994 CD.) James Hawthorne “Chief” Bey (1913–2004) learned drumming from Isamae Andrews, who had danced with Dafora and formed her own troupe specializing in East African dances (see photos in Long [1989: 50–3], and Heard and Mussa [2001: 145]). Bey appeared in a Broadway production of *Porgy and Bess* about 1953 and performed for years at the African Room, a club in Manhattan. After *Drums of Passion*, he recorded with Herbie Mann, Art Blakey, and Pharoah Sanders; since the 1970s, he recorded with Hamiet Bluiett, the World Saxophone Quartet, and (most recently) Randy

Weston. He was a venerated elder of the New York African American drumming community (see Chief Bey [1997] for a recent recording, and Associated Press [2004] for his obituary). Roger “Montego Joe” Sanders, who came to New York from Jamaica in his youth, also studied with Mianns and Cimber and performed with the Dunham and Primus dance troupes. He recorded a lot in the 1960s with artists such as Art Blakey, Ted Curson, Roland Kirk, and George Benson, and he released two albums as a leader on the Prestige label (with a young Chick Corea on piano). Montego Joe continues to work at educating schoolchildren (his early work with teens is documented on The Har-You Percussion Group recording), and he hosts a radio show Sunday evenings on WYNE (91.5 FM) in Brooklyn.

Olatunji’s Drums of Passion dancers and singers also merit special mention for their great dedication and sacrifice in support of African culture. As Taiwo DuVall recently noted (in a personal communication), the lifestyle of those pursuing African drumming and dance in the 1950s and 1960s was very difficult for all, but especially hard on the women:

They [our women performers] went so far as to wear their hair in a natural bush for performances and then to don a wig to get a job. Then they would be fired when discovered. They were in constant fear of not having a job, a major concern because some had children to feed. My own children were in Catholic School and were being chastised regularly for being the children of an Afro-Cuban drummer . . . There was very little money or no money for what those women had to do, being singers and dancers in our shows, but they kept going! . . . Please give those unsung women some praise.

The arrival of jembe drummer Ladji Camara in New York in the early 1960s, and the opening of Olatunji’s Cultural Center in 1967 and Camara’s school in the Bronx several years later, further stimulated interest in African culture. It should be noted, however, that for a long time neither Olatunji or Camara enjoyed widespread support outside the small community of culturally aware African Americans actively pursuing this part of their heritage. As Olatunji notes, the support of John Coltrane for his center was crucial. The void left by Coltrane’s death just a few months after he inaugurated the second-floor concert space was incalculable. (This turned out to be Coltrane’s last recorded concert, recently issued on CD.) Ladji Camara added a new element—jembe-based traditions from the previously

underrepresented francophone countries of Guinea and Mali. The highly virtuosic solo jembe drumming and dancing are different from what is practiced in the anglophone countries of Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia, which had received earlier exposure in the United States.

The generation of predominantly African American hand drummers that came up in the post-Olatunji era in the 1960s and 1970s, and that passed through Olatunji's and Camara's schools and troupes, moved deeper into African traditions. They focused their attention more on jembe-based traditions from Mali and Guinea, and on Senegambian drumming styles, and they formed their own troupes specializing in these repertoires. In New York, important milestones were the founding of the Chuck Davis Dance Company in 1968; of the International Afrikan American Ballet, which gelled in the mid-1970s from various formations of students of Camara; and of the Maimouna Keita School of African Dance in 1983 by Senegalese Mari Basse-Wiles and New Yorker Olukose Wiles. Still another was the inauguration of the annual DanceAfrica festival by Chuck Davis in 1977. Other scenes in other cities, such as Washington, D.C. and Boston, were also developing, again stimulated in part by Olatunji's teaching. (See Wilson 1992 for a personal narrative of this era.)

In the post-Olatunji, post-Camara era, African musicians began arriving in the United States, where they established community drum and dance schools and taught at colleges. The pioneer in academia was Ghanaian musicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia, who in 1958 received a one-year Rockefeller fellowship to study music composition and anthropology at the Julliard School, Columbia University, and Northwestern University. He began teaching summers at UCLA in 1963 and in 1968 he joined the faculty as a professor there (see Djedje and Carter 1989). In Nketia's wake followed a number of Ghanaian drummers, who established Ghanaian drumming at American universities. Among them were Kobla Ladzekpo (Columbia University, 1964; California Institute of the Arts, 1970; UCLA, 1976), Abraham Adzenyah (Wesleyan University, 1969), C. K. Ladzekpo (UC Berkeley, 1973), and Alfred Ladzekpo (California Institute of the Arts). A community of drummers and dancers in Philadelphia, stemming from Ghanaian Saka Acquaye and his student Robert Crowder in the 1950s, has also remained active. In Washington, D.C., Senegalese *jeli*/griot Djimo Kouyate (1946–2004), who established Memory of African Culture in 1983, trained generations of drummers and dancers. So has Ghanaian Yacub Addy, who established Odadaa! in 1982 (see videography).

Today, weekly or even daily African drumming and dance classes taught by Africans from all over the continent can be found in dozens, if not hundreds, of cities around the world (see webography for some listings). Study tours to Africa lasting several weeks are also quite common. Thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of drums from Africa—especially the ubiquitous jembe—are exported around the world each year. And American drum manufacturers are selling similar numbers of African-style drums made from synthetic materials.

Part of Olatunji's great legacy is his work in stimulating African cultural awareness in the United States, work that belongs to these broader currents, which have been in motion since at least the 1930s.

Hand Drumming and Drum Circles

It is only in the past several decades that African-based hand drumming has separated from dance and taken on a life of its own in the form of drum circles—a uniquely American development, with little African precedent, wherein all present play some kind of percussion instrument. Olatunji had a major hand in this movement, indirectly at first through the influence of *Drums of Passion*, and more directly in his later years.

In the early 1980s, on his return to New York after a brief and disappointing foray into Nigerian politics, faced with financial difficulties and diminishing opportunities, Olatunji must have been strongly attracted to the West Coast drumming retreats and workshops to which his longtime student Gordy Ryan then introduced him. Olatunji thrived in this new setting in which he was accorded status as an elder statesman to a whole new constituency. Meeting Arthur Hull and Mickey Hart, who had been deeply affected by *Drums of Passion* and who were developing their own drum circle philosophies in Santa Cruz and the San Francisco Bay area, respectively, further opened the door to new opportunities to spread his message. A worldwide hand drumming and drum circle movement soon followed.

Aided by appearances with The Grateful Dead that enabled him to reach large numbers of young white Americans beginning in late 1985, Olatunji's drumming mission found a different kind of audience. Nurtured on a jam band aesthetic (and, as Hart suggests, on Dead Head parking lot percussion jam sessions stemming from the 1970s), this crowd was less interested in the cultural background of African drumming and more attracted to the euphoria of a group experience. In such an atmosphere, the

uprooting of African-style drumming from its cultural grounding was inevitable.

Olatunji's developing doctrine of communal drumming, influenced in part by Americanized notions of peace, love, spiritual enlightenment, and social action, found resonance in the 1980s and 1990s among white youth and adults searching for alternative means of expression and spiritual fulfillment. It is ironic, though, that his teaching, rooted as it was in fostering appreciation for the beauty of African culture, would spawn the notion of non—"culturally specific," non—"ethnically specific" rhythms and drum circles (Hull 1998: 12, 25–26). Yet it is also not surprising, given that his own drumming drew from a variety of sources, the result of which was hybrid rhythms and techniques not steeped in any one tradition.

As defined by Mickey Hart (2004),

the Drum Circle is a huge jam session. The ultimate goal is not precise rhythmic articulation or perfection of patterned structure, but the ability to entrain and reach the state of a group mind. It is built on cooperation in the groove, but with little reference to any classic styles. So this is a work in constant progress, a phenomenon of the new rhythm culture emerging here in the West.

This path, explored and expanded from the beaches of California to large corporation team-building workshops by Arthur Hull and others, led to a commercialization of hand drumming that involved Remo Corporation, a California-based manufacturer of drum accessories. In the early 1990s, Remo expanded its world percussion line to include jembes, ashikos, and dunduns (or junjuns), three of the main drums used by Olatunji. Made of recycled wood-based shells and synthetic fiber heads, these drums were easy for amateurs to maintain and they stood up to changes in weather. They also appealed to environmentally conscious consumers, especially in light of the fragile ecosystem of the West African sahel and savanna, which could ill afford to supply America with drums. This development facilitated Olatunji's dream of a drum in every household, and he eventually endorsed Remo drums. Even so, he must have had mixed feelings about their synthetic, factory-produced nature; his philosophy of the healing power of drums was based on the trinity of spirits inherent in the tree and the animal skin that make up the drum and the human player who brings it to life (see Chapter 1).

This drum circle phenomenon is somewhat distant from the pursuits of many of the African American drummers associated with Olatunji, who use drumming to, among other things, instill self-respect, cultural pride, and discipline among youth. One early document of such activity is Montego Joe's recording of the New York African American and Puerto Rican teenagers he taught under the auspices of the antipoverty agency Harlem Youth Opportunities Act (Haryou Act; see Har-You Percussion Group in the discography). Some of Olatunji's Euro-American students have also pursued this path, working to curb urban violence through community drumming. Nonprofessional drumming resembling drum circles does have a history in predominantly black communities, however. For example, the Congo Square drummers have been playing in what is called Drummer's Grove in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, since the late 1960s (see Choi [2005] and webography). But in this and other similar cases, there is a spiritual undercurrent of paying homage to ancestors and restoring severed historical and cultural connections (with a Yoruba tinge). This is absent in the other varieties of drum circles.

The relationship between hand drumming in black communities and the more widespread drum circle movement is one of the more difficult aspects of Olatunji's career to understand, because there would appear to be an irreconcilable tension here. Drum circles are based on the partial appropriation and transformation (indeed, simplification) of African-based drumming, to the point of obscuring cultural or racial origins. Their appeal to such a broad, predominantly white, population relies on a mystical universal consciousness—or perhaps a belief in the drum circle's healing powers—based not in African experience but rather in American imaginings of a global utopia. The very nature of the drum circle's all-inclusive philosophy (anyone can do it) precludes getting too close to African rhythms, which are typically performed in Africa by highly trained individuals (not everyone can do it). To many Americans, the complexity of these rhythms would present an insurmountable barrier.

It should not be difficult to see how some African traditionalists (and their American students) would be concerned about appropriation of their rhythms and instruments, many of which have profound cultural and religious meaning. In certain contexts, the misuse of drums can have serious consequences. For example, in Nigeria,

nearly every Yoruba *Òrìsà* [deity] also has its own special drum ensemble . . . Drums also provide the medium through which the

worshippers are in constant ecstatic communication and communion with their Gods and gods . . . The devotees of the *Òrìsà* do not use drums indiscriminately. Appropriate drums must be used for particular *Òrìsà*, otherwise they will incur the wrath of their tutelary [guardian] deity. (Adegbite 1988: 15, 16)

The rhythms must be played properly too, hence the need for extended specialized training. (For insight into the great depth and meaning of one widespread Yoruba drumming tradition, see Euba 1990.) Although some drums, such as the *jembe*, have more secular associations, perceptions of cultural appropriation can be just as serious. This is exacerbated by the enormous disparities in economic and political power between Africa and America. Although some Africans may feel pride in seeing their drums used around the world, they may also object to the export and transformation of their culture with no tangible benefit to them or their compatriots. Olatunji's *Voices of Africa* project (see chapter 9) was directly aimed at addressing this problem, and it must have been a great disappointment to him that he was not able to realize such an ambitious and unprecedented project.

It must also have been a great dilemma for Olatunji in his later years that the drum circle and hand drumming communities in which he moved had other uses for the African culture that he represented. His work during his first three decades in the United States was with predominantly black communities interested not only in past connections, but also in forging new ones firmly rooted in Africa. Witnessing lost traditions being rebuilt, only to see them transformed by others (predominantly white) using a rhetoric of universal rhythm and spirituality, one that was devoid of meaningful connections to Africa, may not have sat very well with some of Olatunji's early students and troupe members and colleagues, and perhaps even with Olatunji himself in certain cases.

Not being born into a drumming lineage may have been an advantage for Olatunji. Not being bound to the strictures of any one tradition, he could shape a generic universal vision of African drumming for American students and audiences, one based on a more secular notion of spirit rather than on specific religious practices. This may help us understand critiques by some Africans and Americans aimed at his background as a percussionist and his role as popularizer of African drumming. A universal philosophy of peace and love, rooted in Africa yet malleable enough to be shaped by Americans for their own needs, was his solution.

Africans and Rhythm

The central place of rhythm and drumming in Olatunji's portrayal of African life merits some reflection because it ties into larger issues regarding representations of Africa. The view he presents in the first sentence of his first chapter ("I'm the drum, You're the drum, We're the drum") can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can serve to forefront a unique artistic sensibility. The inventiveness with which Africans have put their minds to exploring and celebrating sound and movement in the form of music and dance, and their cultivation of the art of percussion, can be a source of wonder and awe for all the world to appreciate. Yet this view can also serve to stereotype and assign a limited essence to a large mass of humankind, one that has suffered greatly from such characterizations of their humanity.

European colonial-era writers, African anticolonialists (such as Léopold Senghor, a champion of the Négritude movement that began in the late 1930s), and African American writers (such as Langston Hughes, whose early writing inspired Senghor) have all referenced the primacy of drums, drumming, and dance in Africa, emphasizing the distinctiveness of Africans and their culture. In response to a dominant European philosophical tradition that privileges the mind over the body, African writers and others of African descent have valorized the visceral and emotional aspects of their cultures. But valorizing these aspects to the point of considering them as defining marks of African-ness—and yielding rational thought as a mark of European-ness—in effect endorses the mind/body dichotomy and reinforces racial stereotypes that deny the full range of human potentiality to all peoples. As Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, a critic of negritude, has noted,

To Descartes' 'I think, therefore, I am,' they [negritude writers] responded on behalf of the black man: 'I feel, therefore I am.' Rationalism is essentially European, they claimed; the black man is emotive and intuitive. He is not a man of technology, but a man of the dance, of rhythm and song.

This simplified view of the black man's world did not pass without its challengers however, and even the early Negritudists soon found themselves compelled to begin to modify their position. (Soyinka 1988: 180)

This Cartesian philosophical legacy, which also devalued bodily expression for people of European descent, is one reason why Euro-Americans are today so drawn to African drumming experiences. Assured of the capacity (as a group of people) for rational thought and reason, they can enter into African drumming from a position of privilege (self-deprecating comments about being rhythmically challenged notwithstanding). The stakes are higher, however, for people of African descent, whose intellectual capacities have a long history of being denied in the Eurocentric world. This may help explain the difficulties Olatunji encountered in garnering widespread support in black communities. His conception of rhythm in Africa may not have been able to combat the stigma attached to African drumming, except among those most culturally curious. At the same time, his later conception of a universal rhythmic impulse may have been too generic to interest those seeking historical connections with their past.

To be sure, Olatunji's message of universal rhythmic expression which can be tapped into by all was intended to foster the notion of a single family of humanity—a family not troubled by racial essentialisms. In a world marked by racism and gross inequities in access to economic and political resources, however, this is no mean feat. But perhaps this is his most enduring message.

Conclusion

Few involved with hand drumming in the United States have not been touched in some way by Baba, as he was called by those who knew him. He instilled pride in generations of African Americans; he stimulated a popular renaissance in African drumming and dance in the United States; he provided cultural education for black youth across the country; he introduced mainstream America to African drumming; and he spread worldwide messages of peace and love through drumming. These are just some of the more resounding aspects of Olatunji's legacy, which has touched so many of us.

Unfortunately, he was unable to see the publication of his autobiography. Baba Olatunji passed away on Sunday, April 6, 2003, at the age of seventy-six, in California, after a long battle with diabetes. His obituary notices were published in major newspapers around the world (for example, Pareles 2003; and National Public Radio took note with a special tribute [see Webography]). The testimonials of his students the world over speak to his lasting presence.

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